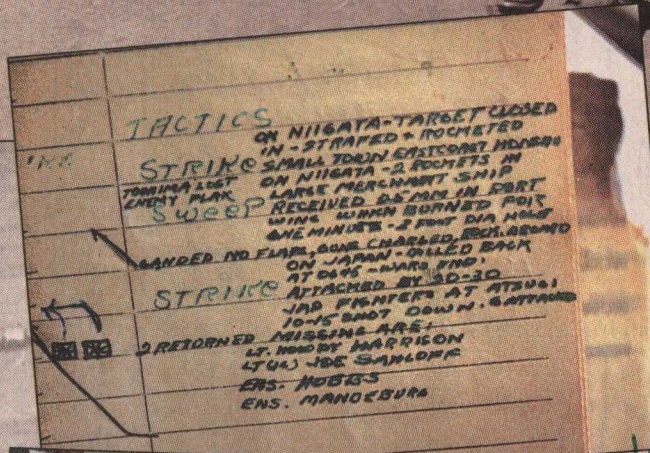


The Last Dogfight



Contributed photo

Ted Wayne Hansen, far right, at Barber's Point, Hawaii, before embarking to the Yorktown. The Hellcat in background is similar to the one Hansen flew off the Yorktown.



Local Navy pilot remembers the tragic final hours of World War II

World War II

7-27-03

By PEGGY TOWNSEND
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Ted Wayne Hansen sits in his neat mobile home with Benny Goodman playing in the background.

It's hard to get him talking about the war. Like getting an engine started when the battery goes dead, a listener has to push a little.

But once he begins, the stories pour out: Like the time a bullet whizzed through the cockpit of Hansen's F6F Hellcat, missing his hand by less than an inch.

Or the time he watched another fighter pilot's wings fold like a giant origami trick after he had been hit by cannon fire and then saw his own wing get hit the same way a few minutes later.

But the story that's probably hardest to tell is one that Hansen is remembered for.

Hansen was in what may be the last dogfight of World War II — one that happened in the skies over Japan a few hours after the war was officially over.

Four of the six pilots never came back.

First flight

Hansen spent most of his growing-up years in Santa Cruz on a chicken ranch not too far from where the Skyview Drive-in is now.

At 14, he took his first airplane ride from a neighboring nurseryman who owned a plane.

Hansen, a musician, traded a bugle for it. The plane took off from the then-Capitola airport and circled over the county.

Hansen doesn't remember seeing much



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Ted Wayne Hansen, top (in 1945 and today), keeps the flight log book from the last dogfight of World War II as well as newspaper clippings of the attack.

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Dogfight

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that stuck in his mind, but the memory of how it felt to soar over the hills and fields stayed with him.

When the war came, he enlisted in the Navy and became a fighter pilot — one of only 180 in the Navy who was qualified to fly at night.

"I enjoyed aviation," he says of his decision.

Hansen, who will turn 80 in a month, is like a lot of men of his generation. He waves off any mention of bravery or skill. He was just doing his job, he says, and yeah, he guessed he had a certain amount of aptitude when it came to flying.

But the stories he tells, sitting in a recliner in front of a row of pictures that includes him with his Navy cap and a mustache that makes him look a little like Clark Gable, tell a different story.

Once, on a training run, he zoomed up behind a couple of buddies in their fighters and did a barrel roll right over the top of both of them.

"I don't recall the results of that," he says with a grin that means he probably got in a little bit of trouble over it.

Another time, he came in too high on a training run and had to drop the plane down so hard it scattered a group of flight instructors standing nearby like leaves on a fall day.

In 1945, he and a few other fighter pilots were ordered to the carrier Yorktown off Japan.

His squadron was called the Fighting 88.

Hansen had no idea what was in store.

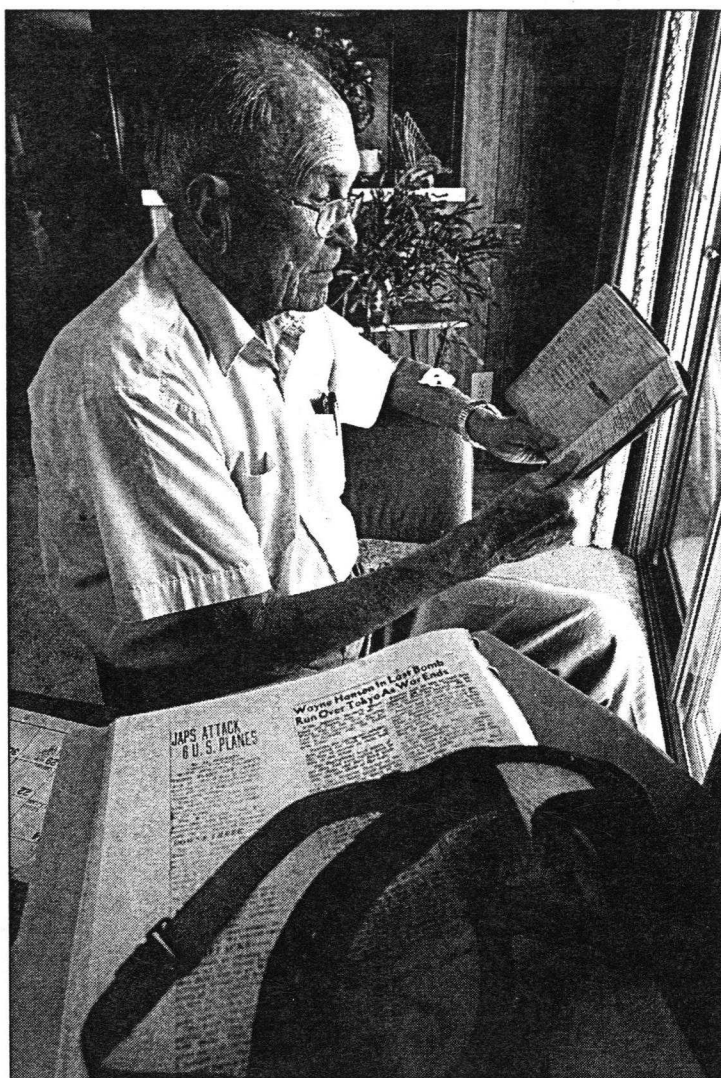
A tough mission

Hansen was 21 and a lieutenant junior grade when he came aboard the Yorktown.

He wasn't afraid, just determined, he says.

But after he'd come back from a mission, his hands would always begin to shake.

In July, bomber raids started



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Ted Wayne Hansen reads his log book entry detailing the last dogfight of World War II.

against Japan's islands.

A few weeks later, Hansen was catapulted into the sky in his Hellcat for a raid on Niigata Harbor.

He was alone in the small cockpit, the 2,000-H.P. engine rumbling in front of him. The Hellcat could fly at almost 370 mph and climb to 20,000 feet in 10 minutes.

It was powerful and tough.

"I liked that plane," Hansen says. "It saved my life."

There had been almost no reconnaissance of the target, so the flight leader dove his fighter down to check things out, says Hansen, leaning forward as he

talks.

There wasn't a lick of resistance — until Hansen and the rest of the crew flew in low.

"Then all hell broke loose," Hansen says. "He must have alerted them or something."

Two planes in front of him, a 37mm cannon shell tore through the plane's right wing.

The pilot tried to pull out of his dive, and the wing folded in half.

His plane smashed into the water, killing him instantly.

A minute later, the same kind of shell tore a hole in the left wing of Hansen's plane.

Hansen cautiously turned the

fighter back toward the carrier, flying 50 feet over the water, remembering what had happened to the unlucky guy in front of him.

He still had two rockets attached to his plane and his four machine guns had locked into the firing position, but that wasn't the worst of it.

Hansen's plane had lost a lot of its hydraulics and part of its electrical system so he couldn't get the landing wheels into position, and he was dangerously low on gas.

When a listener asks how he felt at the moment, Hansen has only one word.

"Lonely," he says and grins.

Everyone but one person had fled from the carrier deck in advance of what amounted to a bomb coming in for a landing.

All Hansen could see was one lonely signalman huddled off in a corner waving Hansen on.

He was ordered to abort his first landing, then his second.

On the third try, Hansen radioed, "Ready or not, here I come," and headed for the ship.

Miraculously, Hansen heard the landing wheels suddenly clunk into place, and Hansen dove his fighter toward the carrier.

He managed to get the plane's tail hook to grab the wires that were laid across the ship to stop a landing plane's advance.

The momentum launched Hansen's rockets out from under the wings, he says.

They bounced once, then twice and went over the side into the ocean.

When mechanics checked afterward, Hansen had only had three gallons of fuel left — just enough to go the length of a carrier at full power.

It was a miracle he survived.

But not like the one that was to come.

The dogfight

It was 4:15 on the morning of Aug. 15 when Hansen's Hellcat was again catapulted into the sky.

It had been six days since the U.S. had dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, and fighter

pilots from the Fighting 88 had been ordered to attack a couple of airfields in Japan.

No one talked of the war ending.

The men taking off included the energetic flight leader Maury Proctor, cigar-puffing Joe Sahloff, the man they called "Howdy" Harrison and two others besides Hansen.

The planes rumbled through heavy clouds, which scattered the fighters. But at 6:45 a.m., just as Hansen's group reached its target, their radios crackled on.

"All Bronco planes cease hostilities and return to base. The war is over," the announcement said.

Hansen called it "a pleasant surprise" and thought they would return.

"But our flight leader said, 'Since it's over let's take a tour of Japan,'" Hansen remembers.

"I thought, 'Oh god, let's get our fannies out of here.'"

But he followed his flight leader and a few miles out, a dozen Japanese fighter planes suddenly dove out of the sky and attacked, Hansen says.

Hansen figured he was a goner.

The lighter, more maneuverable Japanese Zeros began shooting at the American pilots, and Hansen flew in to protect his flight leader.

He shot down a Japanese fighter, then watched as another one approached fast from behind and almost rammed him.

Bullets peppered the flight leader's plane, and he dove back into the clouds.

Hansen followed.

He didn't know it at the time, but he had shot down two Japanese fighters. His flight leader had downed three.

Separated in the clouds, Hansen flew back to the carrier alone, thinking he had been the only one to survive.

His flight leader landed five minutes after him.

He was the only one besides Hansen to return.

Hansen pulls out his weathered flight log and searches the yellowed pages.

There, in Hansen's cramped printing, are the names of those

who didn't make it back that day. Men who died even though the war was supposed to be over.

Joe Sahloff.

Gene Mandeberg.

Wright Hobbs, the guy everybody called "Hybrid" for his preoccupation with Indiana corn.

And Howdy Harrison.

He left behind two kids.

Hansen reads the names slowly, spelling them out, remembering them.

He's never been very religious, he says, so he thinks it's luck that brought him through.

More than 408,000 Americans weren't so lucky.

But many of them are dying now.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates 1,100 WWII vets die each day.

Hansen spent 26 years in the Navy, then ran a computer dating service, where he met his second wife, Betty, to whom he has been married 35 years.

He has five kids and a nice mobile home outside of Castroville.

You want to see a lucky guy? Hansen says.

You're looking at him.

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